Ways to avoid disease in lambs and reduce deaths

LAMB MORTALITY

Bruce Richards, of Paragon Veterinary Group, discusses ways of reducing lamb deaths

THE major driver of sheep production is the number of lambs born alive and subsequently surviving onto weaning, sale or replacement. Overall losses should be less than 15 per cent. Two thirds occur at, or soon after, birth.

I have a large number of lambs dying in the first few days, why?

Reasons are often multifactorial requiring a good history and diagnosis. Chlamydia (Enzootic abortion) and Toxoplasmosis are often associated with abortion and lambs born dead and smelly, but can be associated with weak, poorly lambs at birth that soon die. Mis-mothering or sick ewes suffering from mastitis, metritis, milk fever or ketosis will potentially starve new-born lambs, which cannot survive long in a hypothermic state, so good lambing management and a quick response to diseased ewes and weak lambs (colostrum, milk and warmth) is vital.

The first colostrum feed is crucial in terms of volume, quality and timing. Watery mouth (E coli) is commonly seen in lambs 12- 36 hours old. Signs include dullness, lethargy and depression with a reluctance to suck. Profuse salivation, a wet lower jaw and progressive gut distention follows, usually leading to coma and death. It is associated with unhygienic, wet and dirty lambing conditions, particularly faecal contamination Good colostrum intake and quality will reduce the severity. Other reasons for early death are navel ill with associated peritonitis and septicaemia, and clostridial lamb dysentery.

After a cracking start I always lose a good number of my best lambs. Why?

Clostridial diseases cause death in lambs older than a week, particularly in unvaccinated flocks. They are bacterial infections characterised by rapid bacterial multiplication and exotoxin production with death within hours. The more common are lamb dysentery, pulpy kidney, tetanus, blackleg and black disease. They are easily prevented by correct vaccination of ewes and good colostrum (antibody) intake. Remember deaths can still occur for reasons such as incorrect or missed vaccination, lack of or poor colostrum production in the ewe and poor colostrum intakes.

Lamb dysentery can start as early as a week old, with lambs often just found dead while pulpy kidney frequently affects the fastest growing, bigger lambs. Tetanus is often related to bacterial entry through docking, castration or navel wounds, while black disease is often associated with fluke migration and damage in the liver.

Mannheimia haemolytica (Pasteurella) can cause a bacterial septicaemia in lambs as young as three to four months, which are often found dead.

Hepatic necrobacillosis (liver disease) and septic peritonitis can also occur two to three weeks after birth and is associated with poor navel disinfection and unhygienic conditions. Similarly, joint ill is due to spread via the blood after entry through the gut, tonsils or umbilicus. Incidence is reduced by good colostrum intake and a good quality navel dip.

Nephrosis (Daft Lamb Disease) is a sporadic severe disease of lambs from two weeks to four months of age thought to be associated with acidosis of the blood stream owing to abnormal fermentation in the hind gut. Coccidiosis and Nematodirus often seem to coincide with this problem. Lambs become depressed, stop drinking yet appear thirsty – often standing over water sources and appearing gaunt with empty stomachs.

Nematodirosis can also be an important disease of young lambs on pasture. Signs include profuse diarrhoea and death

What can I do to try and minimise these losses?

- Always lamb fit and healthy ewes in good body condition and trace element status, preferably vaccinated against causes of abortion and clostridial diseases, including Pasteurella (Mannheimia);
- Lamb in clean dry conditions and make sure lambs receive adequate good quality colostrum within six hours of birth and are feeding and mothered well;
- Make sure navels are dipped immediately in a good-quality dip;
- Manage grazing and pastures to limit diseases such as coccidiosis and Nematodirus;
- Control intestinal worm burdens and liver fluke.

ADVICE: Bruce Richards, of Paragon Veterinary Group